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‘I Am Proud of Myself’:
Student Satisfaction and Achievement on an Academic English Writing MOOC

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a detailed thematic analysis of learners’ evaluative comments at the end of a five-week academic writing MOOC run by a university in the UK which used a novel content+process MOOC approach. The authors wanted to identify whether this innovative approach to a MOOC course worked in terms of student satisfaction and achievement in mastering both the content and process of critically-based academic writing in second language (L2) English. The MOOC use of peer feedback, and limited availability of detailed expert feedback from educators and mentors, were the primary sources of negative evaluation. However, in general, they found an overwhelming delight in taking the course, demonstrating a clear sense of pride, achievement, and satisfaction of mastering an unfamiliar and difficult skill that many saw as crucial to their future life plans.

KEYWORDS

Academic Writing, Learner Achievement, Learner Satisfaction, MOOC, Thematic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) first appeared in 2008, when ‘CCK08: Connectivism and Connective Knowledge’ took place with 2,200 participants worldwide. However, the “invasion of the MOOCs” (Krause, 2014) was identified four years later, with the establishment of American MOOC providers Udacity, Coursera and edX in 2012 – coined ‘the Year of the MOOC’ in a now notorious New York Times article (Pappano, 2012). Since then MOOCs have spread further with the UK’s FutureLearn joining the scene in 2013.

MOOCs today can take a number of forms, and cover an enormous range of topics. Amongst the plethora of MOOCs, a number are devoted to English language teaching; this is hardly surprising given the enormous demand for English language worldwide. Of these, a number are in the area of EAP and academic writing. One such Academic Writing MOOC set up by a UK University, called ‘A beginners guide to writing for university study’, started in early 2014 (see Furneaux, Wright, & Wilding, 2018, for an analysis of the issues and challenges faced by the MOOC’s designers and teachers). This MOOC was specifically designed as a novel form of content+skills style, aimed at

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intermediate-proficiency international students thinking about coming to study in the UK; the course aimed to offer both awareness of, and practice in, good academic writing, which many international students can find challenging (Furneaux, 2018; Hyland, 2003). The MOOC's fifth, and largest, iteration in September 2015 had over 41,000 enrolments, making it the most successful of any of the University's MOOCs in terms of recruitment. To date there have been 11 iterations, with a total of 269,138 registered participants.

Such levels of take-up on this MOOC, and increasing provision of MOOCs generally (Ash, 2020), indicate success at some level with regard to what MOOCs aim to provide. However, it can be a matter of debate a) how different styles of MOOC lead to clearly identified outcomes, especially for skills-related learning as aimed for here, and b) how to define MOOC success (Krause, 2014; Liyanagunawardena, Parslow, & Williams, 2017), particularly how far it is pedagogically feasible or desirable to set objective learning outcomes within the MOOC framework that students should "achieve" in order to demonstrate success. Given the explosion of demand for online learning and teaching in the current context of the COVID-19 global pandemic, exploring student experiences of learning via MOOCs, is of added significance.

This study's objectives were thus to explore what success meant to the students on the newer style of Academic Writing MOOC reported on here, by exploring their reported experiences through a thematic analysis of online comments written up as an overall self-evaluation of progress, which formed the final activity in the MOOC course programme. The research questions aimed to identify key themes arising from the student evaluations at the end of the MOOC; to find out if student responses were linked more clearly to either content or process or both; to evaluate the extent of student comments on the degree of feedback and guidance; and finally, to see if other themes could be identified that illuminated students' responses to the mixed content/process design of this MOOC.

BACKGROUND

Research on MOOC Pedagogic Approaches and Student Perceptions

There is a growing literature base in the context of pedagogy and digital literacy (e.g. Corbeil, Corbeil, & Khan, 2015). In early analyses, MOOCS were divided into c-MOOCs, which encourage learning through autonomous, distributed, network learning and connectivism, and x-MOOCs, which follow a more traditional, expert-led information transmission approach (Bates, 2014). As noted in several reviews of MOOC design and pedagogy (e.g. Bayne & Ross, 2014; Corbeil et al., 2015), MOOCs have gone through a wave of re-evaluation, in the light of problems with take-up and some dissatisfaction in participants' experiences (Krause, 2014). The early binary vision has shifted towards more mixed frameworks across a range of platforms, such as the UK's FutureLearn platform.

The shift in focus can be seen in Lane's approach (2012) referring to three overlapping but differentiated types of MOOC:

1. **Network-based**: c-MOOCs, aiming for socially constructed knowledge with teachers as light-touch facilitators.
2. **Task-based**: skills-based through group task completion, requiring the teacher to be an "active agent" in delivering student success (as discussed in Bayne & Ross, 2014, p. 24).
3. **Content-based**: teacher-centred (x-MOOCs).

An early example of a task-based MOOC, along the lines of the model suggested by Lane (2012), is the Translation MOOC for expert translators, run by the UK Open University (Beaven, Hauck, Comas-Quinn, Lewis, & de los Arcos, 2014). This was highly specialised, and small scale (under 400 participants, with high levels of language proficiency already required), with the expert participants creating their own outcomes for success. However, such MOOCs are difficult to scale up, and the